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ABSTRACT

Examples drawn from books and interviews of blacks reveal techniques of oral and literate communication both during and after slavery. These techniques fall into two complementary categories: communication as surreptitious resistance and communication about overt resisters. Surreptitious communication occurred through the use of code words which signalled meetings and escapes. For example, spirituals with heavenly themes actually referred to the end of slavery and the word "weevil" referred to the white patrollers who kept slaves from escaping. Often tales included messages at odds with stated conclusions; that is, a testimony stating that blacks are not dependable because they learn so early to be deceptive really illustrates a unity among the slaves who used code words when the white master eavesdropped on them. Communication about overt resisters, both male and female, usually focused on the slave who wouldn't be whipped. The message of these tales was that a slave who resisted punishment asserted his or her humanity and dignity. Thus, the personal accounts of slaves illustrate that they resisted in many ways. What they remembered and how they communicated their memories reveal messages important to them beyond slavery itself. (Author/KC)

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"IF TREES WOULD TALK": THE COMMUNICATION OF RESISTANCE IN EX-SLAVE NARRATIVES

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Note: This working paper, which includes part of a talk given on March 12, 1980, remains preliminary and presents an overview of the topic.

Since Fisk looms significantly in my sources and aids, I would like to begin with a brief commercial. Now a national historic monument, Fisk University was founded after the Civil War by the American Missionary Association. The school's name comes from General Clinton B. Fisk, who was in charge of the Freedman's Bureau in Kentucky and Tennessee. Fisk's heritage is special because of the achievement of the Jubilee Singers, whose concerts beginning in 1871 and especially following a successful tour of England (including an audience before Queen Victoria) led to the building of Jubilee Hall. Dedicated in 1876,[1] this hall is still an important campus building and Nashville landmark. The Singers have continued since the 1870s and remain a most precious group of ambassadors for the school.

The original Jubilee Singers set the standard most compellingly for using the creativity of black religious expression and faith for very practical ends. Art and values literally made possible the continuation of more formal education for blacks. Although it might be argued that the spirituals of the Singers are more "refined" than the original folk expression, the sentiments and spirit are not changed. I am studying the attitudes and information especially emphasized among slaves as the background for the strong faith in themselves and in formal education exhibited after the war. I am assuming attitude to be a basic and crucial part of education of any sort.

Although obviously not all slaves thought and felt the same, certain commonly found attitudes, especially those reflected in the folk sources as a whole, such as the spirituals, begin to indicate prevailing group views. Narratives are informative sources of slaves' attitudes both because of the folk materials within them (that is, they often record the songs and sayings of the group) and because they present a range of individual attitudes in detail. One might say they supply the case studies. Narratives of course need to be augmented by other sources, but I am concentrating on narratives as a most basic source.

In considering that question often put devastatingly (or with no reaction whatsoever) on freshman English themes: so what?, I would say that narratives both explain and illustrate communication techniques which assisted black survival. Everyone agrees that narratives have to be read judiciously and if one reads or "listens" carefully, clear, if sometimes indirectly presented, messages can be heard.

The phrase "if trees would talk" (varied from an initial "if trees could talk") is taken from Nikki Giovanni's "Alabama Poem."* The poem conveys the pride of two aged blacks encountered by the young black narrator. The aged man and woman point out that their experiences have taught them more than the narrator will learn from the books at Tuskegee. There are many possible applications of "if trees would talk" in the poem's context. I would only highlight here that the poem captures in both theme and style the importance of the voice in black expression. The oral tradition is both explained (education is not necessarily achieved through literacy alone but through experience and the handing down of the legacy from old to young) and exemplified (the dialogue and phrasing are highly oral). The role of the voice is emphasized in Giovanni's own reading of the poem to the background of gospel music in the album "Truth is on Its Way."

Although the old people in Giovanni's poem are probably not former slaves, narratives from an earlier time often stress a similar tone and theme. If we consider ex-slaves as "graduates" of slavery, the question of what some slaves knew can be addressed fruitfully through close attention to what, how, and why some former slaves emphasize what they do.

The topic receives further narrowing by considering ex-slaves' treatment of resistance, since the subservient position is in large measure what defines slaves. In particular, the recurring figure, "the slave who wouldn't be whipped," asserts the slave's humanity in the context of a common experience in slavery--whipping--designed to remind slaves of their subservience. Further, slaves often resisted through their communication and narratives both report and exemplify such resistance. This study considers content in the light of context and considers common methods of communication by blacks both within and beyond slavery. Such an approach provides a basis for exploring how the communication of ideas underscores the messages presented.

Two complementary and interrelated parts provide the structure for considering the topic briefly here: 1) communication about surreptitious resistance, with a focus on the use of code words as a representative

*In Re: Creation (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970), p. 33. Giovanni is an eventual Fisk graduate. Of her expulsion following a Thanksgiving trip home without following University regulations regarding clearance to do so, she observes: "The second greatest thing that happened to me was getting kicked out of Fisk because I had to deal with my life. . . . After knocking around and sponging off my parents for a while I went back to Fisk as a woman--not a little girl just being good like everybody said." Giovanni, Gemini (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971), p. 148. See also pp. 7-8; 10-11, 37. Recently, students at Fisk dedicated a yearbook to her and she came back for the occasion.

example and 2) communication about overt resisters, specifically "the slave who wouldn't be whipped." Throughout attention will be given to the manner in which these points are discussed by ex-slaves.

Some initial attention to definition helps clarify scope and methodology further. A narrative may be defined simply as a first person account of one's life. Unless the context makes it clear or if both kinds are meant, this study distinguishes between two main types: book length accounts generally written in an antislavery context (called books hereafter) and shorter accounts based on interviews.[2]

Books are mainly pre-twentieth century sources and generally have a polemical purpose. Interviews are primarily twentieth century sources, consisting especially of the now forty-one volumes of The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography edited by George P. Rawick. This collection contains information gathered from survivors of slavery in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writer's Project of the WPA. Two volumes done independently through Fisk University prior to 1930 under the direction of Charles S. Johnson are also included in the Rawick printing of the WPA interviews submitted to the Library of Congress as of 1941: Unwritten History of Slavery and God Struck Me Dead, the latter primarily conversion narratives.[3]

Robert Stepto's recent reminder that not all slave narratives are autobiographies should be kept in mind.[4] The main purpose of narratives is often not merely to tell an individual life story but to arouse opposition to slavery, to allow others to hear its effects, or (in the case of the WPA interviews) to give out of work (usually white) white-collar workers a job.

There are then several caveats which must be kept in mind in using narratives of any sort. In the first place, ex-slave narrators were atypical. In books, narrators were most often men, mulattoes, and residents of border states. They also generally had relative mobility (i.e. were involved in work which enabled them to see a variety of places) in addition to determination, innate intelligence, and luck. Interviews in the 1930s tended to focus on persons known to the interviewers (or ex-slaves who were relatively accessible to the interviewer); many of those interviewed experienced slavery only as children. WPA workers, as suggested above, were mostly Southern whites not highly skilled as interviewers.[5]

As for the atypical book narrators, John Blassingame has pointed out that white writers of autobiography have not been disqualified as commentators on situations beyond the personal because the narrators are extraordinary.[6] The very perceptiveness of the individual who has "worn the shoe" as one ex-slave described it, should be a plus rather than a minus.[7] Though often separate themselves from the lot and attitudes of other slaves, the atypical narrators are informative about more than just themselves in discussing slavery. As for the preponderance of male narrators, the fact that women are better represented in the interviews helps offset the smaller number of books by women.[8]

As for the atypical quality of those interviewed, many of whom say they were better off in slavery than they were in the 1930s, it may not be surprising that many of the ex-slaves said they had good masters or mistresses: their relatively better treatment may have made it possible for them to survive into the 30s.[9] Some rebellious slaves were literally edited out while others fled the areas in which ex-slaves were most often interviewed.[10] Therefore, the nature of attention to resistance and conflict which remains is significant.

Secondly, it might be objected that the narratives reflect only the person's perceptions (perhaps), not necessarily historical accuracy or truth. True, but if something is perceived or imposed as a reality, it is important in understanding slaves' attitudes. The purposes of narratives have to be kept in mind: the cruelty of slavery gets emphasized in books, for example; what ex-slaves talk about in interviews sometimes depends on what they are asked. The issue of memory in aged subjects has received much attention.[11] More will be said about the significance of memory in a moment, but here it may be noted that for my purposes, what seems to be remembered is enlightening. What ex-slaves retained, even if exaggerated or inaccurate, tells what was meaningful to them. The speakers, after all, grew up with people who had been slaves a long time, and we thus learn what was handed down as well as what was experienced directly.

Finally, since books were written for white audiences and interviews were for the most part done by whites, the information supplied cannot be taken at face value. The methods and restraints of communication indicate that slaves had or chose to be deceptive, reticent, or selective to most whites in regular communication, especially about freedom. Ex-slaves recalling their experiences follow a similar trend. Narrators in books could perhaps be franker than those being interviewed by Southern whites, but restraints usually remained: the Northern audience had its interests and emphases as well. This study considers the nature of the audience, genre, and, where known, the individual's situation in evaluating the messages presented.

Such caveats need to be kept in mind then, but they are not drawbacks when one is considering the manner in which information is presented as well as content.

The major skill which characterizes both books and interviews is the use of memory. Stepto, speaking of books, has observed that the former slave is "above all <u>remembering</u> his ordeal in bondage."[12] This use of memory is not different from autobiography by those who have been literate to begin with (that is, the usual pattern of Western autobiography), except that ex-slave narrators do not have the materials of diaries or other papers that would have been available to such narrators as Franklin or Henry Adams. The searing and detailed quality of the ex-slaves' memories probably have a basis in an oral tradition.

The use of memory is part of the systematic training--education--in non-literate societies. Though he is speaking mainly of pre-literate Western societies, the remarks by Walter Ong on the role of memory are germane in this context too, for they point out the importance of events as central to knowledge in oral cultures:

> Without script, knowledge is best stored not in abstract categories but in terms of events, happenings, res gestae--things done or goings on. Such events are preserved in the minds of men not by being classified and listed but by being clustered into the stories told about a relatively small number of heroic figures. This economy of storage determines what sort of knowledge is stored.[13]

It cannot be argued that literate ex-slave narrators are emphasizing events solely because of an initial grounding in an oral culture: events were at the same time the best way to dramatize the situation of slavery. Yet training in memory cannot be underestimated. Blassingame observes:

> The riddle and the tale were the most important educational tools. Since a youngster's status among his peers was partially dependent on how accurately he recounted a tale or riddle he had heard from his elders, he early learned the importance of memorizing details. This early memory training is, I believe, the key to the remarkable accuracy of the memoirs of illiterate blacks so characteristic of the slave interviews and narratives and recently illustrated anew by Nate Shaw in All God's Dangers.[14]

It is also important to note that the use of memory in oral cultures does not mean "memorized" in a static, unchanging way. Rote was not the emphasis, though training children to remember detail might be an initial step. In this regard, the details which are recalled in the narratives are informative. At the same time, making a critical assessment of basic information was also taught in and beyond slavery. Again, Blassingame: "Anyone examining slave riddles will find it easier to understand the seemingly amazing philosophical bent and impressive analyses of a William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, or Nate Shaw."[15] This point is important to note at the outset because editors of slave narratives from the earliest to the present have been reluctant to credit former slaves with any ability to analyze--some other hand (mind) is usually seen in these cases. Experiential knowledge is primary in narratives, but it need not be present in isolation from analysis of that knowledge to be "authentic."

The interviews discussed here are Fisk's Unwritten History (Tennessee and Kentucky), 39 informants, interviews conducted by Ophelia Settle [Egypt]; Weevils in the Wheat (Virginia, mostly from the Tidewater and Piedmont region), 157 informants, interviews done primarily by the black unit from Hampton Institute headed by Roscoe Lewis and made available in 1976 through the work of Charles L. Perdue and others; Mississippi WPA interviews, over 500 informants; and miscellaneous brief narratives collected in Slave Testimony.[16]

The first two, Unwritten History and Weevils in the Wheat, have the advantage of mainly being done by black interviewers and comments are franker. Further, the plus of these accounts is that effort was made to get the exact words of the ex-slaves. Though they are not as reliable in terms of text, the Mississippi interviews provide deep South representation to offset the border states' emphasis of many slave narratives--books and interviews. In addition, the supplement to series 1 of The American Slave augments the relatively sparse number of Mississippi interviews (26) originally published in the Rawick series (1972). With the supplement, it is possible to compare some original and edited versions, although it is recognized that original does not necessarily mean a verbatim text. The materials in Slave Testimony were collected closer to the end of slavery than the WPA or Fisk interviews and were either scrupulously recorded or the product of the ex-slaves themselves.

As for books, I have sought texts generally considered to be "authentic," that is, written by the narrator rather than heavily edited or ghost written, and to include (in any possible combination): someone with a memory of Africa, a woman, a nonmulatto, and someone who was not a fugitive slave. I also wanted to use examples who had been in slavery for a considerable length of time before leaving it. The four to be discussed very briefly herein are the narratives of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, "The African," as he identified himself; Frederick Douglass as "a man," as that is how he identifies himself (also his is probably the best known narrative ever--these remarks concentrate on the 1845 Narrative with comparisons where necessary to later versions); Harriet Jacobs, a woman (perhaps as "the mother" or as "the submerged woman"), although I have some questions about the representativeness of some of the attitudes there; and H. C. Bruce as "The New Man," the title of his book, although since H. C. stands for Henry Clay, we might need to wonder how "new" the attitude is. (Clay, a slaveowner who favored gradual emancipation and colonization, was accused of treating his slaves cruelly.[17])

All except Equiano were mulattoes.

In what follows, the discussion of the manner of communication about code words concentrates on interviews; the discussion of "the slave who wouldn't be whipped" includes books and interviews. Books, of course, discuss code words as well. In order to limit discussion here, however, I concentrate initially on techniques of oral expression and then consider oral and literate expression about a most central theme bearing of self-image: "the slave who wouldn't be whipped."

Communication as Resistance: Code Words, Beautiful Talk, Tales, and Frames

A literal image helps set the stage for brief consideration of slave communication with a focus on code words. The work "An Idyll of the Deep South" by Aaron Douglas* depicts the post-slavery era, but I especially like the scene because of its suggestion of categories I began using to assess learning under slavery: there is the work experience, the religious experience, and in the center (literally intensified by the circles) reflections perhaps on both those segments through music and dance in a period of more secular relaxation. More than earthly guidance is provided by the star which sheds light on the whole scene. The circles connect all segments: again, as shown by the Jubilee Singers, art, values, and experiences are all linked.

For my purposes also, it is significant that the entire scene takes place apart from even the quarters in the background: trees are the only witnesses to the fundamental expressions of blacks.** Slaves did often have to "steal away" to "brush harbors" or "hush harbors" to worship as they chose. Nineteenth century narratives give varying information on the nature and role of the meetings in the woods, but such meetings were clearly important in presenting messages which slaves saw as true to their feelings and interests.

Just as sermons in such meetings presented veiled messages and spirituals used code words to signal meetings and escapes, so were code words and phrases with double messages used to discuss subjects to be kept from whites'(although some whites might be trusted on some matters) and potential black traitors' ears. In the sets of interviews considered here, there are certain patterns of speech which can be surveyed through the ex-slaves' comments on the use of code words.

In Unwritten History, on being asked some of the songs sung in slavery, an informant identified as Mr. Reed gives the following list:

> "I am bound for the promised land," "No more, no more, I'll never turn back no more," "Come on moaner, come on moaner, come on before the judgment day," "Run away to the snow field, run away to the snow field, my time is not long," "Moses smote the water and the children they crossed over, Moses smote the water and the children they crossed over, Moses smote the water and the sea gave way," "Quit this sinful army and your sins are washed away." (p. 47)[18]

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*Chairman of the Art Department at Fisk for many years. He died last winter and his funeral was held in the Fisk Chapel. Associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas created murals at Fisk and other places depicting the history and experiences of blacks. The original "Idyll" is in the Countee Cullen Regional Branch of the New York Public Library. The Fisk murals are in the Administration Building (originally the library). Douglas also illustrated James Weldon Johnson's God's Trombones.

**Another implication of "if trees would talk" I would like to pursue more fully is the slaves' being attuned to nature as a source of know-

Although Mr. Reed does not explicate the meanings, the end of slavery is the message of most of the songs and the reference to snow cannot be interpreted as a heavenly home. Such a list is helpful to note also because the flow of the phrases--relatively short with the use of repetition--suggests the balance which Mr. Reed and others use in their own comments. These features are most likely there because the interviews were taken down very carefully. There was a stenographer in the background who took down the words "while the interviewer asked questions and tried to put the subject at ease and allow him to tell his experiences without interruption."[19] Mrs. Egypt has also indicated that she asked questions only if necessary, as for example if the speaker's memory began to flag and that after the first few interviews she and Dr. Johnson worked out questions they wanted to be sure to cover, especially on recurring topics.[20]

The result is that the interviews capture the flow of black speech. Although it is not poetic language, but rather the language of conversation (which of course can be poetic at times, especially in an oral culture), it is akin to what Stephen Henderson has called "the tradition of beautiful talk": ". . .this tradition of saying things beautifully even if they are ugly things. We say them in such a way which takes language down to the deepest common level of our experience while hinting still at things to come."[21] The interviews in Unwritten History do not make extensive use of the devices which Henderson then enumerates such as virtuoso naming or understatement, but the speakers do often use effective rhythm and repetition. Perhaps the most noteworthy example comes from Mr. Reed again. This passage follows the often quoted "wore the shoe" comment: "If you want Negro history you will have to get [it] from somebody who wore the shoe, and by and by from one to the other you will get a book." He continues:

> I am going to tell you another thing. A Negro has got no name. My father was a Ransom and he had a uncle named Hankir. If you belong to Mr. Jones and he sell you to Mr. Johnson, consequently you go by the name of your owner. Now, whar you got a name? We are wearing the name of our marster. I was first a Hale then my father was sold and then I was named Reed. He was brought from old Virginia some place. I have seen my gandma and grandfather too. My grandfather was a preacher and didn't know A from B. He could preach. I had a uncle and he was a preacher and didn't know A from B. I had a cousin who was a preacher. I am no mathematician, no biologist, neither grammarian, but when it comes to handling the Bible I knocks down verbs, break up prepositions and jumps over adjectives. Now I tell you something--I am a God sent man. But sometimes Jim calls and John answers. The children of Israel was four hundred years under bondage and God looked down and seen the suffering of the striving Israelites and brought them out of bondage. Young folks

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ledge. This would include the role of intuition as well as knowledge of patterns and forces in nature (such as for healing). Attitudes toward conjure and roots would also be relevant to attempts to avoid being whipped (as the role of Sandy in the Frederick Douglass narrative).

> think old folks are fools, but old folks know young folks are fools. How many old folks do you find in prison? (p. 46)

Mr. Reed's being a preacher has clearly contributed to his eloquence. Although he expresses the familiar "namelessness" of blacks at the outset, the vigor of his discussion as well as the information itself shows that he knows who he is, down to a talented lineage. Mr. Reed has mastered names and grammar by sheer force; his repetitions ("didn't know A from B," "was a preacher") reinforce the power that he is saying that he has. The phrasing pattern is representative of a common method of communicating in the Fisk narratives, although the verve is Mr. Reed's --an indication that these interviews capture the individuality of the narrators.

On the use of code words, another speaker in Unwritten History observes of evening church meetings sometimes allowed slaves:

> . . .you would take the front seats, with the padderollers behind, so that if the preacher said something he shouldn't say, they would stop him. One time when they were singing, "Ride on King Jesus, No man can hinder Thee," the padderollers told them to stop or they would show him whether they could be hindered or not. Sometimes the white folks would come in when the colored people would have prayer meeting, and whip every one of them. Most of them thought that when colored people were praying it was against them. For they would catch them praying for God to lift things out of their way, and the white folks would lift them. (p. 125)

Since they were often hindered from "riding on" by grapevines stretched across the road, patrollers were right in being upset by a song letting them know they were not King Jesus. Such an attitude of whites toward "Ride on King Jesus" is noted in other narratives as well; what I call attention to here is how the speaker uses his own word play on the word lift as he is explaining implied messages of the past. There are other examples of how the flow of speech is both explained and exemplified in the Unwritten History interviews (as pp. 126-127; 132). Again, all comments are not as distinctive as the ones quoted, but there is a vigor about the expression which indicates the perceptiveness of the speakers in most cases.

The interviewing techniques in Weevils varied with the interviewer; some interviewers, for example, wrote up their notes on the evening of their visit. There were also approximately eighty recordings made (much of it song) with transcriptions taken from them.[22] The gatherings that Susie Byrd describes in Appendix 8 of Weevils, in which many ex-slaves recalled events and conditions, perhaps suggest why there are numerous anecdotes, especially family stories in Weevils: such gatherings may easily have become storytelling sessions. Whatever the reason for the anecdotes--Susie Byrd's methods were not used by most of the other inter-

viewers and she did not write up her accounts as group sessions but as individual narratives, the comment of Arthur Greene in Weevils (p. xlv and 123) frequently applies literally: "Well, God done spared a few o' us to tell de tale" (emphasis added). There are many stories, especially those involving resistance, which include dialogue and vivid detail. This material especially begins to suggest the folk tradition through fully developed and dramatically told episodes, which, as has been seen, are an important part of the knowledge of those in non-literate cultures.

In Weevils, the title itself is a code phrase, a warning that danger is present in having a meeting perhaps because of betrayal by a white or untrustworthy slave. The phrase is used in a slightly different form in a tale in the work:

> I don' remember anythin' 'bout slavery 'cause I was born free, but a few o' de tales I useto heah momma an' poppa tellin' still stick wid me. Momma useto tell how dey was goin' to have a party, an' de paddyrollers heahed o' it. De talk go somepin' lak dis:
>
> "Say! I heah dey goin' be a big party over at de Follkeses tonight."
>
> "Yeah!"
>
> "Um. Huh! But dey bugs in de wheat."
>
> Dat mean de ole paddyrollers be comin' by dere dat night an' sho' nuff dey come. Yessir. Come 'roun 'bout ten o'clock dat night. Dey didn' ketch anybody 'cause mos' de niggers wen' right out de winders when dey come in de do'. One ole man hid behin' de door an' 'scaped gittin' ketched, dey said 'cause de paddy-rollers was too dumb fur to look behin' it. (p. 297)

We note that this is a story that has been retold many times. It is very vividly recreated down to dialogue ("De talk go somepin' lak dis"). In many cases in Weevils, as will be seen, a child was the witness to the event and it made a great impression on him or her. In this case, the tale illustrates the role of stories handed down through the family. The comic conclusion makes the butt of the joke the dumb patroller, just as the spiritual discussed in Unwritten History "signified" about the limitations of the patrol.

The Mississippi interviews need the most care in reading. Here we do learn in most cases more about the interviewer's manner of reporting than we hear the ex-slave's own language. As Rawick indicates, the WPA narratives cannot be used as a means of studying dialect or black speech patterns.[23] (I would separate Weevils for the reasons mentioned above.) Although the language is not necessarily reliable, there is often a pattern of response which allows for interpretation in either of two directions. I call this a "framed" or equivocal response, partially because, as the editors of the Mississippi volumes have pointed out, there are signs that editing has been done.[24] The responses are often also literally framed in that the speaker may deny any controversial behavior or attitudes personally, but is very detailed about the messages of resistance which were communicated or about the resistance of other people.

Introductory and concluding statements deny the effect of these messages on the speaker, but the details--the memories--in the middle are vivid.

The following is an example of a "framed" or equivocal statement related to the use of code words. From an interview with Edward Jones conducted by Carrie Campbell:

> Life was mostly very pleasant for us. Our houses were comfortable, and we had plenty of warm cover at night. The white folks house was just about the same as most white folks lives in now. It warn't so good and it warn't so bad that it made any special memory in my mind. It must have been tall off the ground 'cause we would get under it to hear what the white folks was talking about. The white folks would come to our house to eaves drop too. It was a habit for us to talk about white horses when we meant white folks, so if they heard us they wouldn't know we was talking about them. That's the reason you can't 'pend on nothing colored folks tells you to this good day. They learned to be so deceivable when they was young. (VIII, 3, 1205)

The passage begins by suggesting lack of hardship under slavery. Although the speaker claims to have no special memories, the physical detail of high houses brings out the divisions that existed between blacks and whites (each eavesdropped on the other). The moral drawn is that blacks are not dependable because they were taught to be devious, but the specific information suggests a certain amount of unity among slaves.

Other interviews by Carrie Campbell present a variety of kinds of information (she does not seem to stack information to get a particular view of slavery; for example, VIII, 3, 1085); her interviews seem relatively trustworthy in terms of content. The opening of the interview with Jones indicates that he establishes his own authority based on experience:

> I can remember heaps more about war days than folks think I can 'cause I don't discuss it with them. I made up my mind long ago not to get in no argument with folks what ain't got no logic in their conversation 'cause it don't get you nowhere, and there ain't no argument against ignorance. (VIII, 3, 1203)

Later Jones says:

> After the war was over my family stayed on the place they was on for a year. The others stayed on until they died. Some white folks told us later that after Old Master died, Old Miss married a Yankee man. That looks like the colored is more loyal than the whites. Even now there ain't no good colored man that will go against his boss, lessen he has been corrupted by some story that ain't got no substance it, just like the stories they used to tell about Abraham Lincoln. The darkies all had it he was a black man,

> and the son of the queen. They didn't tell no such stories on Jefferson Davis, 'cause both the white and black knowed he was a grand man. I have been on his plantation near Vicksburg a many a time. He had all the people on his place learn to read and write. (VIII, 3, 1207-1208)

Jones goes on to tell how the Davis property was "saved" during Reconstruction when it was deeded to the former Davis slave Ben Montgomery.[25]

In Jones's comments there is criticism of whites who were not as loyal as blacks. Even though the information about Lincoln is clearly unfounded (many stories occur about Lincoln travelling through the South in disguise; perhaps the speakers confused him with John Brown or one of Brown's emissaries[26]), the point is that Jones indicates that he was the minority rather than the majority when it came to assessing the meaning of Lincoln for blacks. Jefferson Davis is considered a grand man, but the details explain that he is grand because of how he treats his slaves (enabling them to read and write) and because of how his slaves treat him (it is a black man who enables Davis to regain control of the plantation eventually).

In general, if attention is kept on the details of information provided in contrast to the editorial conclusions in the Mississippi narratives, the messages are sometimes at odds with the stated conclusions. As D.H. Lawrence has observed in another context, trust the tale, not the moral the teller draws.[27] Edwards Jones probably believed the conclusions he gives; nevertheless he provides information on which other conclusions can be drawn as well.

Although Carrie Campbell reports a variety of attitudes, the question might be raised in general about the Mississippi interviews: how do we know that the frames or equivocation are those of the speaker rather than of the interviewer? Indeed, some frames may be there <u>because</u> of the interviewer,[28] but what is significant is the detail that is recorded. The interviewer might add editorial comments or manipulate general conclusions, but would also seem likely to make the specifics consistent with the generalities if all were false.

Further, the Mississippi interviews as a whole show that blacks being interviewed knew their audiences. Sometimes they were talking to descendants of their former masters and it may have been injudicious to tell the whites exactly how they felt. For example, Nettie Fant Thompson's interviews are all relatively short, except when she is interviewing people in the Fant family (these interviews are full of praise for that family). Perhaps the ex-slave women who praised the Fants were doing so genuinely, but they doubtless also knew a family member (or someone with that name) would not want to hear otherwise.[29] The short answers which Thompson records suggest that she did not usually get more than limited information to routine questions. Two of her informants (when the subject is mentioned at all) have never heard of "nigger uprisings" and in

turn ask her what that means. In other words, ex-slaves knew how much to say and to whom; they were successful in being direct when possible, indirect when not, and quiet when necessary. Whether the equivocal "frame" comes from the interviewer or the ex-slave, the waffling is significantly on controversial subjects. This thematic emphasis is not surprising: it does invite closer attention to the details that are provided. The process of "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick" may come from the memories rather than from the morals.

A final brief account referring to slaves' use of code words can prepare us for consideration of book-length narratives as well because it is by a literate ex-slave. Ambrose Headen wrote an autobiographical sketch at the request of a white teacher and it was published in the American Missionary in 1878.[30] The work is Headen's own; there are nevertheless certain emphases--religion and formal education--which would interest the audience for which it was written. Headen highlights his refusal of drink, the good treatment he received from a Baptist minister (unlike the hypocritical Southern ministers one finds in many books); the importance of Abolitionists for slaves; and, as noted, the value of formal education. In the midst of these comments, Headen makes the simple report: "We always called 'freedom' 'possum,' so as to keep the white people from knowing what we were talking about. We all understood it."[31]

This comment stands out in presenting what characterized interaction in the slave community, as opposed to Headen's individual struggles. It does not take away from any of Headen's points, but the detail about the code expression makes vivid the shared interest in progress even during slavery.

Again, a few examples do not prove the extent or impact of the use of code words or that all slaves communicated through the flow of speech, tales, or equivocal statements. However, the messages are reinforced or qualified by the way they are presented and the details stress the significance of activities and attitudes separate from the enslavers. Such a survey also provides a background for considering "the slave who wouldn't be whipped" for in interviews, the same representative techniques as noted here for Unwritten History, Weevils, and Mississippi narratives continue to be found. In addition, it has been seen that the threat of whippings went with the meetings often announced or conducted through the use of code words.

Communicating about Resistance: The Slave Who Wouldn't be Whipped

Again, our central image is relevant: trees were often literally part of the violence against slaves, for slaves escaped to the woods to avoid whippings or to protest overwork and other abuse (and perhaps continued to "read" trees by knowing which way was North by the moss) or ran up trees to avoid dogs. Slaves were tied to trees and whipped; in addition to the cowhide whip as a weapon, trees often supplied the means by which the whipping was done.

The following passage provides a context:

> Old man Coffman was a mean old slave holder. He was afraid of his slaves and had someone else do the whipping. They were rougher on my aunt Eleanor, because she was stubborn. They would punish the slaves severely for remembrance. They whipped with a rawhide whip and trace chains. Wilson Harris was whipped at a tree once and when they got through he said he would fight. They whipped him some more until he was weak and bleeding. The other slaves had to grease his shirt to take it off his back to keep from tearing off the flesh. We can go down there now and pick out trees where the slaves were tied and whipped. The trees died on the side where the slaves were tied. . . .[32]

Three general points can be noted: a woman is a notable resister, just as a man is; punishing for "remembrance" meant to use as an example to keep other slaves in line; and a slave who refused to be whipped was not always successful.

As noted previously, a slave who refused punishment (and whipping was most common) asserted his or her humanity and dignity in contrast to the basic definition of slavery. Of the WPA interviews, Rawick notes: "If the ex-slaves had one thing in common, it was their universal consciousness and hatred of whipping."[33] He bases his comment on the many references to whippings and the fact that even if their own masters and mistresses were reported as good, ex-slaves were still able to give details of whippings on "other" plantations. Such statements are characteristic of the "framed" statements in the Mississippi interviews.

As it happens, in books the figure "the slave who wouldn't be whipped" reflects the theme of identity (who are you?)[34] in ways which capture the thrust of the book as a whole. Further, interviews and books complement each other in showing the significance of this figure. I am including various kinds of resistance--one time and constant--as well as avoiding whippings by running away.

A brief introduction to each of the four books can be provided by considering the question of their authenticity, which in turn includes attention to the more formal education of the narrator.

It is generally agreed that The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself (1789) is authentic, although Equiano uses additional sources for some of the information on Africa and borrows an incident from a narrative by another African.[35] A 1789 review thought that an Englishman may have assisted Equiano in compiling his material; the book's most recent editor finds two different styles in the book (plain and rhetorical) and concludes that any revisions "probably consisted of little more than the working up of occasional rhetorical climaxes."[36]

Equiano did not find major bars to his attempts to learn to read and write under slavery in keeping with more liberal attitudes toward the education of slaves at the time, especially if learning was for religious purposes.[37] At one time he was forbidden to learn navigation because it was feared he would escape.

Equiano was born in what was then called Guinea (Benin) and kidnapped in approximately 1745 when he was about ten years old. He experienced a mild form of slavery in Africa before being taken to the coast and enduring the Middle Passage. He was, as part of his African name suggests, "favored or protected" in that he did not suffer plantation slavery in the Americas (which doubtless facilitated his education), but generally worked on ships. He spent very little time in America, more in the West Indies, and most of his time in England. He was able to earn money as a slave and to buy his own freedom when he was 21, after some difficulty in getting his master to live up to his word.

Douglass and his Narrative are probably the most well-known of all, so I will not try to summarize his life. As Stepto has pointed out, Douglass is not dependent on others to affirm the work's authenticity.[38] It is important to recall here the impetus for writing the Narrative, which put Douglass in danger of capture: questions had been raised about the authenticity of his background; he sounded too good to have been a slave and his abolitionist "colleagues" told him to put a little more plantation in his talk. They wanted Douglass to stick to the facts (his experiences) and they would take care of the philosophy.[39] The book itself tells how Douglass began to learn to read and write and it is the classic independent struggle, using ingenuity and deception.

Except for Blassingame, who questions the credibility of the Jacobs narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) has generally been called "authentic," that is the work of Jacobs herself (called Linda Brent in the narrative) with only minor editing by Child.[40] As the title and rather unlikely pseudonym suggest--even though her real name was Harriet Brent Jacobs, Linda was not a common slave name, the details of Jacobs' story are less significant than the situation. We are now dealing with a group or category "slave girl" which is not very accurate for the book, since the periods as woman and mother are more prominent; specific

identity is to be hidden rather than authenaticated given the concern with modesty and reputation for a woman. Jacobs, who was approximately the same age as Douglass and who says she grew up in South Carolina, was taught to read and write by a "kind" mistress (who forgot the promise to set her free at her death). Whether or not Incidents is credible and by Jacobs herself, the narrative presents attitudes which need to be balanced by attention to the interviews.

The New Man; 29 Years a Slave; 29 Years a Freeman (1895) has not been edited or questioned, but the verifying endorsements published with the book originally indicate that the issue was no longer could the ex-slave have written it, but is the message acceptable? The Washington Post found the content satisfactory: "The writer is not a professional Colored man. He is not conspicuous in protest against the attitude of white people toward the race" (p. 176). (In other words, Bruce was not a "race man.") Two out of three endorsements say that "colored people" ought to read the book for their edification. The endorsements are based on selective reading.

Bruce, who was a slave in Virginia, Mississippi and mainly in Missouri studied with white playmates and encountered opposition only at one point to learning to write, which was especially feared because slaves would (and did) write their own passes. He also says that his mother's family was very devoted to learning and that all his brothers and sisters could read (his brother was B. K. Bruce, Reconstruction Senator from Mississippi).

The differences in "the slave who wouldn't be whipped" in the books may be summarized as follows: for Equiano, the comparable event is given little emphasis; for Douglass, his own resistance is of central importance in his (as presented) highly independent struggle for freedom and identity; in Jacobs, the figure is always a man; and in Bruce, the figure is in theory loyal to the master's interests and, in example, the rebel.

The purpose, time, and individual characteristics help explain these differences. Equiano's book on the whole tells more about the difficulties of the freed black than of the slave and it is therefore appropriate that the event comparable to "the slave who wouldn't be whipped" takes place after he was freed. He was in Savannah, Georgia when two white men attempted to kidnap him back into slavery on the grounds that Equiano was "identical" to a slave they lost. But when Equiano's English is "too good" and he threatens them with a stick besides, they give up. (See Equiano, end of Chapter 8.)

What is most representative about the event is that Equiano makes little of it. It is only one of many distasteful things that happen to him. Part of the reason is that, as he says at the end of the book, echoing introspective Protestantism, each event that happens to an individual is significant. (His concern with the state of his soul after his conversion to Christianity plays a major part in the book.) Further, Equiano

never assumes that being enslaved has made him less than human. He thought that Europeans (used to include the English) had superior knowledge and thus he wanted to resemble and imitate them (Chapter 4), but said he did not consider himself European. They knew more than he, but he could learn it too. If there is a split between Vassa, the legal name literally forced on him with blows and Equiano, "the oppressed Ethiopian," Vassa, the individualist entrepreneur predominates. But he always used his African name first and identified himself as "The African." His boyhood envy of an English girl's complexion and his marriage to an Englishwoman in 1792 may not suggest pride in blackness, but Equiano does not consider himself separate from others by virtue of his color.

Frederick Douglass certainly had no doubts about his humanity as he ferociously makes clear. His central episode of resistance is probably the most anthologized chapter from the Narrative: Chapter 10, recounting the fight with Mr. Covey ("You have seen how a man was made a slave, you will see how a slave was made a man," p. 77). In identifying this as the primary liberating experience (a man was made a slave by being broken in by Covey), Douglass both includes and goes beyond his learning the significance of education for a slave. He says the battle "revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (p. 45). In later versions, he becomes more explicit by saying the battle recalls his "Baltimore dreams." In Baltimore, Douglass discovered that a man was made a slave by keeping him illiterate and he dreamed of freedom thereafter.[41] But the fight takes Douglass to a step beyond what literacy can provide--just as Equiano was helped by articulateness, but also a stick.

In later versions too, Douglass softens the point made in the 1845 Narrative that only one who has experienced the effect of successful resistance to slavery can know what that means. The 1845 Narrative reads:

> He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom (p. 83).

Later "heaven of freedom" was revised to "comparative heaven of freedom" but the point remains that experience is indeed the best teacher. The language of the central journey of salvation is used in a most secular context and perhaps to some readers in an almost blasphemous way: he has caused his own resurrection. Douglass is not alone in using the pattern of slavery to equal sin or death and freedom, resurrection or salvation, but he uses it most strongly. Unlike Equiano, who constantly analyzes his spiritual state as a Christian of his time would, Douglass is sure.

The passage and incident are also emblematic of the whole book in enforcing the idea that he is involved in a lonely struggle with the exception of a few male friends. He leaves out, for example, the moral and material support of his future wife in his escape from slavery even

in later versions when he did say more about the escape. It has recently been pointed out that not only did her savings help him make the journey but that she made the sailor suit he escaped in.[42] He underscores his point that his is the story of Frederick Douglass, an (i.e. one) American slave, with Written by Himself, more of the answer to his critics: he is a person, an individual, and based on his experience, superior rather than inferior to his challengers.

Obviously, as both Child and Jacobs point out in introducing the work, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is designed to reach white women of the North and the emphasis is slanted toward what would be effective. Features common in sentimental fiction abound: the distressed maiden, love, the fallen maiden, and in the case of "the slave who wouldn't be whipped," men as active heroes. Primary resisters are her brother William and her Uncle Benjamin both of whom she closely identifies with.

As a woman, Jacobs has another sphere in which to show her resistance. She does not submit to her master's wish to make her his mistress; she chooses out of self-defense and as she says with calculation to become the mistress of another white man, whom she thinks will be kind to her and who is not already married, as her master is. She has two children by the man she chooses. Jacobs' decision to run away from slavery comes because of her children (she feels she can then get them out eventually) and her resistance is based on that.

Whether the attitudes presented are Jacobs', Child's or both, the treatment of men only as active rebels is not borne out by the interviews. Perhaps the most anthologized example of a woman refusing to be whipped is in the interview given the title "My Mother was the Smartest Black Woman in Eden" from Unwritten History (pp. 283-291):

> My mother was the smartest black woman in Eden. She was as quick as a flash of lightning, and whatever she did could not be done better. She could do anything. She cooked, washed, ironed, spun, nursed and labored in the field. She made as good a field hand as she did a cook. I have heard Master Jennings say to his wife, "Fannie has her faults, but she can outwork any nigger in the country. I'd bet my life on that."
>
> My mother certainly had her faults as a slave. She was very different in nature from Aunt Caroline. Ma fussed, fought, and kicked all the time. I tell you, she was a demon. She said that she wouldn't be whipped, and when she fussed, all Eden must have known it. She was loud and boisterous, and it seemed to me that you could hear her a mile away. Father was often the prey of her high temper. With all her ability for work, she did not make a good slave. She was too high-spirited and independent. I tell you, she was a captain (p. 284).

As is typical of material in Unwritten History as noted previously, the passage captures the vigor of expression through the lists (here all the active verbs in series in the first and second paragraphs) and the repetition ("I tell you. . ."). The account continues in a similar way, complete with dialogue, recreating the time Fannie refused to be whipped even when she was threatened with being shot. Cornelia, the daughter who tells the story, says she finally understands the cruelty of slavery when her parents have to leave because of this incident; Fannie remains a strong role model. The parents later return. In the meantime, Cornelia is very happy when people say she is going to be just like Fannie.

There are at least six examples of women who refused to be whipped and one who tells of fighting off a rape attempt in Weevils in the Wheat (out of about fifteen resistance episodes).[43] Among the individual resisters is "Ant Sallie" who runs away when she is demoted from house to field and is caught in her brother's house when she comes there to get food. Her nephew recreates the scene through dialogue and detail which indicate that this is a story which has been told many times:

> I was layin' on de pallet listenin' to her an' pa whisperin' an' jus' den dere come abangin' on de do'. It was wedged shut an' dar was ole Marsa bangin'. "Come on out dere Sallie," he yelled. "I know you is in dere." Didn't nobody say nothin'. Den I heard ole Marsa yellin' fo' all de niggers an' tellin' em to come dere an' catch Sallie else he gonna whip em all. Dey all come, too, and gathered 'round de do'. Pa didn't know what to do. But Ant Sallie ain't ketched yet. She grabbed up a scythe knife from de corner an' she pulled de chock out dat do' an' come out a-swingin'. An' Marsa didn't dare tech her.
>
> She cut her way out, den turned roun' and backed off into de woods, an' ole Marsa was just screamin' an' cussin' an' tellin' her one minute what he's gonna do when he ketch her an' de next minute sayin' he gonna take her back in de big house ef she stay. I was peekin' out de slip of de winder, an de las' I saw was Ant Sallie goin' into de bushes still swingin' dat scythe. Didn't no one foller her neither. (p. 289)

We note that Pa didn't know what to do, but Ant Sallie did.

There are perhaps fewer "larger than life" stories about strong women such as Fannie and Ant Sallie which become part of the black folk tradition in general, but the pattern of their behavior is no different from that of the "bad" or "crazy nigger," the "crazy" often applied by whites as a means of saving face in avoiding a confrontation. "The slave who wouldn't be whipped" suggests this bad figure (with of course positive connotations of "bad" and "crazy" for blacks in keeping with the dual communication technique: in this case, the same word may have opposite meanings). Blassingame notes that such rebels, often called high blooded, were among the slaves accorded the highest status in the quarters.[44] Even if the result is failure such as being subdued or broken in (for example Randall in the William Welles Brown narrative) or being sold further South as numerous narratives record, the effort can be appreciated. The image is one of hope more than despair, even though desperation is often a motivation for the act.

Hope is especially stressed in the stance opposite that of overt defiance, the trickster, one who uses cunning to survive. The trickster often sidesteps rather than meets trouble head on, in this case avoiding whipping by running away rather than standing up to the threat. In Weevils in the Wheat, the story of Uncle Jackson is such an example. Recalled by his nephew as a "favored nigger even though he was always fixin' fo to run away," Uncle Jackson (who once got away for as long as five years) was the "raid fox" for the patrollers, that is he led them off on false trails to protect slaves meeting. The following is one of the few examples I have found of meetings segregated by sex--perhaps it was not solely a religious meeting:

> I remember one time the niggers was havin' a "hush harbor" down in the pines an' they had Uncle Jackson stationed down near the slave quarters to warn them effen Master missed his slaves. I was a little boy, an' they didn't let us go to the meetin's but we knew they was goin' on, 'cause all the men was gone, an' the women was sittin' round wide awake watchin' fo' the patterollers an' fearin' dat their men gonna get a hidin'. (p. 181)

The speaker then captures the dialogue very effectively of Jackson playing innocent and the master sure his slaves are meeting down in the woods. We see the scene thanks to the nephew who with everyone else in the cabin was "lyin in the do' lockin' out at him an' wonderin' was ole Master mad 'nough to really whup Uncle Jackson, 'cause he ain' never whupped him befo'" (p. 182). The master chases Uncle Jackson around the barnyard while Uncle Jackson is denying at the top of his lungs that "there's a meeting here tonight" and in the process warning the slaves already meeting. The master tries to grab Jackson's shirttail as Jackson tries to get over a fence and ends up pulling off the top fence rail. The rail and Jackson land in a heap on top of the master. After all this commotion, as funny and as vividly told as any chase scene in the movies (and suggesting a John-Master tale in black folklore), the next day, the speaker tells us: "Uncle Jackson went on to wuk in the mornin' an' ole Master act like he done forgot all about it."

Uncle Jackson was assisting the secrecy of the hush harbor communication which might have been that covert action to prepare for more overt action (Ellison) even though the next day work went on as usual. Blacks and whites both knew what was really going on beneath the surface, although polite fiction maintained otherwise. Most notably, Uncle Jackson was not whipped. The oft-told story doubtless entertained and cheered many ex-slaves through the years as well.

Overt resistance gets similar respectful and detailed discussion in Weevils and the other interview sources considered here as well.[45] In Unwritten History, perhaps the most notable is that of Alfred Williams:

> Many a time they'd have church there and there was a thicket near and the padderollers would get in there and wait and whip them as they were leaving church. Old Alfred Williams was the preacher, and he would send somebody after his marster Andrew and he would sit

> there with his gun on his lap to keep them from whipping him 'til his marster would come and take him home. Yes, he was colored and a slave too, but they used to have good meetings there 'til old Mr. Cantrell said they would have to stop that. He was a Presbyterian minister, and he said they had God troubled on the throne, and they didn't 'low no two or three men to be standing about talking either. They feared they was talking about being free. They didn't bother the women that way, but no man better not try it; they would search the slave houses for books too. (p. 4)

Here the sense of identity for the speaker comes not so much from what went on in the religious meeting itself, but from the image of the preacher sitting there with a gun on his lap refusing to be whipped ("Yes, he was colored and a slave too, but. . .").

Again it is Mr. Reed who captures the wonder of such a stance and suggests its significance for others:

> I didn't see it but I used to hear my mother tell it at the time how they would whip them with a cowhide and then put salt and pepper in your skin until it burn. The most barbarous thing I saw with these eyes--I lay on my bed and study about it now--I had a sister, my oldest sister, she was fooling with the clock and broke it, and my old master taken her and tied a rope around her neck--just enough to keep it from choking her--and tied her up in the back yard and whipped her I don't know how long. There stood mother, there stood father, and there stood all the children and none could come to her rescue.
>
> Now it is a remarkable thing to tell you, some people can't see into it, but I am going to tell you, you can believe it if you want to--some colored people at that wouldn't be whipped by their marster. They would run away and hide in the woods, come home at night and get something to eat and out he would go again. Them times they called them "run-away-niggers." Some of them stayed away until after the War was over. Some of them would run to the Yankees and would bring the Yankees back and take all the corn and meat they had. (pp. 43-44)

Once again the effective repetition ("There stood. . .") helps tell the story and emphasize the impact.

An example from the Mississippi interviews is the one with Frank Hughes conducted by Mrs. Ed Joiner. Hughes argues the inferiority of blacks to whites even when Mrs. Joiner asks leading questions to try to make him say otherwise. Hughes may have been convinced of his comments, although Mrs. Joiner's perspective is clear also. In her preface to the interview with Henry Gibbs, she notes: "Has a fine attitude, relative to his own and the white race. Very humble and most polite" (VIII, 3, 815). Also, two white men accompanied Mrs. Joiner when she interviewed Frank Hughes, doubtless making the odds against Hughes even stronger. In any event, the most detailed response comes to a question about runaways:

> Yesim I've heard of niggers runnin away. My wife's uncle, he run away to de north in Ohio, caise de overseer wanted to whip him. He was pressed into the Civil War. and went through it. Several years later he came back South. Years afterwards he registered up for his pension, and de first draw he got was $1500.00. He bought a home in Columbus. He got to be a fine carpenter. His name was Alex Glass . (VIII, 3, 1064-1065)

The theme of a pension runs through the interview ("What does you know Miss, about de ole Age Pension, I jes don't understand about it") (p. 1065). Many of the ex-slaves interviewed felt there was some connection between what they said in the interview and whether or not they would get a pension. In any case, the fact that Alex Glass did not have trouble with his pension and that he ran away rather than submit to being whipped seems to have made a marked impression on Hughes.

A final post-slavery assessment of the overt resister also suggests the framed or equivocal statements of the Mississippi narratives. H. C. Bruce, who also speaks of resistance only in terms of men, identified "the slave who wouldn't be whipped" as one who is at the same time loyal to the master's interests. Twice in his preface, Bruce praises the slaves who would not be whipped for any reason and at the same time "would work with honesty and fidelity at any task imposed on them" (pp. iv-v).

In many ways, Bruce presents himself to be this contradictory paragon (who would have to be aided by a master who never asked anything unreasonable), but a miniaturized presentation of his handling of the theme is made clear in his story of Bluford. Bruce tells the story to make clear that Bluford was an example of the "viciousness of runaway Negroes, particularly hard cases." However, the details of the story indicate that Bluford was, if not justified, at least not condemned, in fighting back the poor white overseer after some "neglect or minor offense" on Bluford's part. Bruce states that Bluford's master does not ask for any explanation of Bluford's action and that the resulting fight is therefore not Bluford's fault. Later, Bluford is forced to kill in self-defense. Bruce notes that Bluford was aided in escaping (in 1855) by being able to read and write (Bluford read maps and knew where the rivers were) and was doing quite well after the Civil War. There seems to be no condemnation of Bluford in this conclusion (pp. 34-36).

There are many other examples, but throughout the slavery section (which he addresses more authoritatively: "Slavery as I saw It" as compared to "Freedom as Seen by Me"), Bruce details the achievements and attitudes of slaves despite opposition and violence at the same time that his generalities are praising the "aristocrats" black and white of the "old school." Published in the year of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition speech, the work was written in an atmosphere of lynching and the reversal of reconstruction gains. His endorsers conveniently overlook the problems of the "29 years as a free man" as they rejoice in Bruce's lack of a blanket condemnation of slavery.

Even such a brief survey of methods of communicating about resistance highlights the individual strengths and dilemmas of the ex-slaves telling their stories. The post-slavery situation is part of the presentation of self. Although in books the mistreated slave not allowed to be a "man" may be stressed to attain audience sympathy, the emphasis also shows not accepting an outside opinion of one's status and identity. Combined with the interviews showing what ex-slaves remembered vividly especially about their own family members, the message is reinforced even more.

Again, a few examples are not conclusive evidence of the general attitudes of slaves. My concern at this point has been to present individual voices and attitudes, for, as most slaves knew, they were first of all individuals, not things and not an undifferentiated mass. Everyone was not an Uncle Jackson, an Ant Sallie or a Frederick Douglass. But those who weren't enjoyed hearing and talking about them (and usually did not aid their masters against the slave who rebelled). There are doubtless negative self-images of blacks (I have not even tried to discuss the word "nigger" and its various connotations, color consciousness, or house and field relationships among slaves), but the way information is presented helps us hear reinforcement of positive images in a range of situations. Slaves resisted in many ways and what they remembered and how they communicate those memories contain the messages that were important to them even beyond slavery itself.

I have a final image. There are several references in interviews to a device that slaves were made to wear as punishment. It is described in an appendix to the Alabama narratives as follows:

> In the Federal Museum of the Mobile Public Library, an interesting relic of slavery days may be seen. This is a "Bell Rack" found in the thicket near the East Head of Pigeon Creek, Greenville, Butler County, Alabama. It is an upright iron bar or post and to this is attached an iron collar which was closed by a bolt but the bolt was gone when the rack was found. A belt went around the waist and through an iron loop. A Bell (which is also gone) was hung from the hook at the top, above the Negro's head. The hook served the double purpose of keeping the slave in the highways and open places as it would catch in the limbs of the trees and cause the bell to ring in case the slave tried to run away through the woods. This rack was used only as a very exceptional punishment and caused no real suffering except the fatigue of being kept upright. The slave could move around, however, but had no chance to make a getaway.[46]

Aside from the bland ("interesting relic") and apologetic ("no real suffering") language, the speculation on what happened in the case of the "bell rack" (and imagine the mental suffering of having to be so confined) emphasizes finally that there are many stories we will never hear perhaps because trees were the only witnesses. I like to think that since the rack was found in a thicket with a) the warning bell missing and b) the confining bolt missing that whoever was wearing it last was aided by others in getting out of it and did in fact, contrary to the conclusion above, get away. Trees do talk and help us understand the sentiment of Giovanni's poem: "My hands seen/ more than all/ them books they got/ at Tuskegee."

NOTES

[1] Summarized from The Story of the Jubilee Singers; with their Songs. Edited by J. B. I. March (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), pp. 7-64.

[2] In some discussions, the terms interview and narrative are used discretely (for example, John W. Blassingame, Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p. lvi). The fact that interviews may merely be written up in narrative form (as opposed to a question and answer format in which the information was originally taken) is not overlooked here. In the case of the interviews conducted by blacks and considered in this paper, however, effort was made to get the participant to speak freely and questions were kept to a minimum by the interviewer. Interview with Mrs. Ophelia Settle Egypt, Black Oral History Project, December 12, 1972; Fisk University Special Collections; Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves, ed. by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp. xxxv-xxxvi and Appendix 8. The Mississippi interviews (to be identified more fully subsequently) show more signs of perfunctory interviewing.

Studies of narratives in the strictest sense (that is, book-length works by a single author) have usually been conducted by literary scholars. Marion Starling, Charles H. Nichols, Margaret Y. Jackson, and Frances Foster Smith are among those who have written on slave narratives. Other works such as those by Butterfield, Burger, and Stepto place slave narrative in the continuum of black autobiography into the twentieth century.

Historians tend to use interviews alone, as Paul D. Escott, Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) or cite selections from both interviews and books to make certain thematic points about slavery, as Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) and Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979). Some historians distrust narratives and interviews entirely, though the period of neglect of such sources seems to have ended. See also footnote 4.

This study considers books and interviews since considering interviews alone does not facilitate appreciation of individual stories in depth and attention to books alone means a more limited range of narrators (see p. 2).

[3] (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Series 1 and 2, 1972); Supplement, Series 1, 1977; Supplement, Series 2, 1979). Unwritten History is Vol. 18 (1972).

[4]From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 6.

[5]Works giving attention to the strengths and weaknesses of narratives (interviews and/or books) include the following: Blassingame, The Slave Community, pp. 227-238; Slave Testimony, pp. xvii-lviii; Escott, Slavery Remembered, pp. 6-17; Norman R. Yetman, Life Under the "Peculiar Institution" (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), pp. 1-4; Thomas L. Webber, Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), pp. 268-269; C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," American Historical Review, 79 (1974), 470-481; Kenneth M. Stampp, "Slavery--The Historian's Burden," in Harry P. Owens, ed. Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1976), pp. 166-168; Rawick, The American Slave, Supplement, Series 1, xxxvii-xxx; also lxxxviii; Weevils, pp. xliii-xliv.

[6]Slave Testimony, pp. xli-xlii. A different factor applies to slave narratives, however, for as has been noted above, not all slave narratives are autobiographies. Roy Pascal characterizes the autobiography as "essentially European." Design and Truth in Autobiography (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 3. Certainly stress on the importance of an individual's perceptions and life is a post-literate Western emphasis thematically. I say post-literate because, as Walter Ong has discussed, pre-literate Western societies featured collective outlooks. The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 231-232. Ex-slaves are of course writing in the individualistic Western genre, as critics have pointed out. At the same time, the representative quality of the self is distinctive in black autobiography. Stephen Butterfield, Black Autobiography in America (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 3; Frances Smith Foster, Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 5 and 65.

James Olney, who has studied Western autobiography extensively, finds the emphasis on the "communality of existence" in African autobiographies comparable to the emphasis in black American narratives: "This communality of existence is unknown, or virtually so, in autobiographies of white writers of the West. There is an intriguing similarity often traceable between the autobiographies of Africans and such black American autobiographies as Frederick Douglass' Life and Times (and other slave narratives), Richard Wright's Black Boy, W. E. B. DuBois' Dusk of Dawn, and The Autobiography of Malcolm X. The similarity turns on the communality of experience and the consequent representativeness of the author's voice." Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 57n.

As suggested, slave narrators are doubtless not consciously drawing on African attitudes through the narrative as form. At the same time, this similarity may be showing indirectly the continuation of group values and outlooks which draw on an African heritage not lost in slavery. In any case, in speaking about and for others, the slave narrator in books had a difficult task. Frances Smith Foster observes: "The success of an [ex-slave's] narrative required that he be perceived as an example, but economic and often personal success required that he be seen as an exemplar" (p. 65). In other words, the audience would be interested in the individuality and uniqueness of the ex-slave (perhaps too interested, such an emphasis is a way of saying the ex-slave who gets out of the environment is exceptional), whereas the major purpose of the book--to arouse opposition to slavery in general--would be defeated with an overemphasis on these features. How the narrator in books handles his point--basically his or her own relationship to the wider community of slaves is relevant to understanding how the narrator presents his or her own sense of self. In a fuller study of such narratives, I wish to consider such points.

[7] Unwritten History, pp. 45-46. See also below, p. 8.

[8] Yetman, Life under the "Peculiar Institution," p. 3n says that males are disproportionately represented in the original Library of Congress volumes (Rawick, Series 1 and 2) in relation to the total population. There are still more women interviewed than are represented as authors or dictators of books. For example, women represent 60% of those interviewed in Weevils (p. xlii), approximately 55% of those interviewed in Unwritten History and approximately 40% of those interviewed in Mississippi. Only about 20% of book-length narratives are by or of women.

[9] Slave Testimony, p. li; Henry H. Mitchell, Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 96.

[10] Slave Testimony, p. li; The American Slave, Supplement, Series 1, VI, 1, xcvii (specifically on Mississippi).

[11] Most commentators make two points: 1) the persons interviewed experienced slavery as children and therefore cannot have borne the full brunt of slavery and 2) what little they remember at such a late age may be untrustworthy. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that older people may remember incidents from childhood more vividly than recent events. Blassingame, The Slave Community, p. 229; Marion Starling, "The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History," Diss. New York University, 1946, p. 344. Other references in footnote four also discuss this point.

[12]From Behind the Veil, p. 3.

[13]The Presence of the Word, p. 203.

[14]"Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources" in Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery, p. 148.

Thomas Webber's Deep Like the Rivers rightly gives much attention to the oral tradition in the shaping of slaves' attitudes. Carter G. Woodson's The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 (1919; rpt. Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968) remains a standard basic source which focuses on more formal education of slaves and free blacks.

[15]"Status and Social Structure," p. 148.

[16]Unwritten History was originally published separately in 1945; Weevils in the Wheat consists of material which was part of the WPA project, but which was not all included in The Negro in Virginia, WPA narratives published separately from the Library of Congress (Rawick) volumes. The Mississippi volumes have at least two black interviewers (Will Strong and Ethel Fleming); their reports consist to a great extent of summation and stress the participants' post-slavery community achievement.

[17]Slave Testimony, pp. 164-165. Richard L. Troutman, "Emancipation of Slaves by Henry Clay," Journal of Negro History, 40, No. 2 (1955), 179-181 presents a different view.

[18]In the Fisk Black Oral History interview, Mrs. Egypt explains that exact identification of the speakers is not made in Unwritten History because written permission to do so was not asked of the subjects at the outset of the project. Oral permission to include each subject in a book was received.

Page numbers of quotations or summation from narratives will be given in the text when the particular volume is otherwise clear. Mississippi interviews will be identified by Roman numerals for volume and Arabic numbers for part and pages. Unless noted otherwise, all Mississippi references are to Supplement, Series 1.

[19]Ophelia Settle Egypt, "Social Attitudes during the Slave Regime: Household Servants versus Field Hands," reprinted for private circulation from Publication for the Sociological Society, 28, No. 2 (May 1934), p. 95.

[20]Interview, Fisk Black Oral History Project.

[21]Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic Referents (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), p. 33.

[22]Weevils, pp. xxxiv-xxxv; pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

[23]Supplement, Series 1, VI, 1, xxxix.

[24]Ibid., xcvii; also xcii-xciii gives an example of an edited narrative on resistance (Pet Franks).

[25]Frank E. Everett Jr.'s discussion indicates that neither Jefferson Davis nor his brother Joseph expected Ben Montgomery (father of Isaiah, one of the founders of Mound Bayou, Mississippi) to be able to manage to keep possession of the plantation beyond the time that reprisals may have been taken against Davis by confiscating his land. A letter Everett quotes from Ben Montgomery suggests that Montgomery felt Davis would resume possession. At that time, there were problems caused by floods. Brierfield: Plantation Home of Jefferson Davis (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1971), pp. 85-95.

See also the material on Isaiah T. Montgomery in the Mississippi narratives, IX, 4, 1532-1549.

Ben Montgomery's invention of a boat propeller led to a Confederate law dealing with patents for slaves. John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 197; Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History (Washington, D.C. The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1941), p. 231.

[26]Rawick. Supplement, Series 1, VI, 1, lxxxvi.

[27]Studies in Classic American Literature (1923; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1951), p. 13.

[28]The Barney Alford interview (VI, 1, 23-49) seems to have the frames or equivocal statements in the revised version rather than in the original, for example.

[29]Some of the Nettie Fant Thompson interviews are as follows: William Black, VI, 1, 143; Lizzie Fant Brown, VI, 1, 255; Rena Crawford, VII, 2, 534; Josephine Coxe, VII, 2, 525; Callie Gray (Lizzie Fant Brown's half sister), VIII, 3, 860; Laura Jane Jackson, VIII, 3, 1112; Emma Johnson, VIII, 3, 1153; Aaron Jones, VIII, 3, 1185; Abe Kelley VIII, 3, 1266; Liza McGhee, IX, 4, 1402; John Archie Moseley IX, 4, 1595; Lizzie Polk, IX, 4, 1732; Alice Shaw, X, 5, 1920.

[30]Slave Testimony, p. 682.

[31]Ibid., pp. 744-745.

[32]Rawick, Supplement, Series 1, II, 215.

[33]Ibid., VI, 1, xliii.

[34]The use of the term identity perhaps recalls all the discussions of slave personality following Elkins' Slavery and more recently Blassingame's The Slave Community (1972). See Ann J. Lane, ed., The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) and Al-Tony Gilmore, ed., Revisiting Blassingame's The Slave Community: The Scholars Respond (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978). Also Keith Andrew Winsell, "Black Identity: The Southern Negro, 1830-1865," Diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1971.

The term is not used to apply to psychological theory here. I proceed with the view that the literary considerations of tone, language, and emphasis are informative guides for considering how slaves felt about themselves and others. I recognize further that the narratives, for reasons already discussed, cannot be treated as purely literary texts.

[35]The incident of the "talking book" seems to have been borrowed from A Narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. Paul Edwards, ed. Equiano's Travels (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1967), p. 186. Equiano himself cites Anthony Benezet's Account of Guinea and Account of Africa for information on Africa.

[36]Edwards, p. xvi.

[37]Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, Chapter II, "Religion with Letters" and Chapter III, "Education as a Right of Man." See also Winthrop Jordan, White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 133. Both books are speaking mainly of America, but since slavery was in colonial settings, attitudes toward slave learning in such places are significant. In any case, Equiano was probably helped most by fortunate personal contacts.

[38]From Behind the Veil, pp. 18-26.

[39]My Bondage and My Freedom (1855; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 361-364.

[40]Starling, p. 300; Nichols, Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of their Bondage and Freedom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. xi; Walter Teller, Introduction to Incidents (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. x. The latter two sources reiterate Child's comments as verification or quote her without additional comment.

[41]Peter Walker's discussion of Douglass's attempts to find out the exact year Douglass went to Baltimore the first time--suggesting that he dated his real "life" from that year--is relevant here. Moral Choices: Memory, Desire and Imagination in Nineteenth Century American Abolition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 210-212, pp. 233-236, p. 364 (14n).

[42]Sylvia Lyons Render, "Afro-American Women: The Outstanding and the Obscure," The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress, 32, No. 4 (October 1975), p. 308.

[43]Other references to resistance (not just refusing to be whipped) in Weevils are found on pp. 26-27, 80, 84, 93, 155, 156, 194, 238, 280, 298, and 347.

[44]"Status and Slave Resistance," p. 149.

[45]Other examples of resistance in Unwritten History are found on pages 34, 54, 76, 139, and 145. Other examples from Mississippi interviews in which there is very detailed information on resistance even if "frames" deny the meaning of the activity for the speaker include: Charlie Davenport, VIII, 2, 558-572; Dora Franks, Series 1 (1972) VII, 51; Supplement, Series 1, VII, 2, 784; Edd Roby, IX, 4, 1867-1868; Andy Snow X, 5, 2001.

[46]Rawick, Supplement, Series 1, I, 499.

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